

For Immediate Release
June 1, 2006

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Fostering a Better Future
by Senator Larry Craig

This morning, I woke up to a little confusion. Could it be June already? Sure enough, May has drawn to a close, and with it, National Foster Care Month has wrapped up as well. But just because the month is over doesn't mean the need for foster care families has gone.

There are more than 500,000 children in foster care in the United States, and the need for foster care providers is ongoing. Many people do not realize there are children right next door, down the street, or elsewhere in their own community in desperate need of temporary refuge.

Children in need of foster care come from homes that are in a state of upheaval. While it is true that some are eventually adopted by their foster parents or another loving family, the majority are simply in need of a stable, caring environment for a limited period of time. According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, during fiscal year 2004, 53 percent of the young people leaving the foster care system were reunified with their birth parents or primary caregivers.

For those unable to return home, sadly, some never are adopted, and "age out" of the system. When these young people age out of the foster care system without any strong ties to a caring adult, they are vulnerable to a number of difficulties. Barely more than half will finish high school, and as many as 1 in 5 will be homeless within four years of leaving foster care. The list goes on, and each item is an obstacle that makes it more difficult for that young man or woman to succeed in life.

In an effort to help, my office in Washington, D.C., participates in the Congressional Foster Youth Internship Program. This program gives young people who were once foster youths an opportunity, not only to work on Capitol Hill, but to gain valuable work experience in an office environment. Many have gone on to successful careers and some even become advocates for foster care and foster care reform.

You can help too. Perhaps you would consider serving as a mentor or advocate for one of these children in your community. And if you haven't thought about becoming a foster care provider, I strongly encourage you to consider taking on that challenge. There are many resources available to help you decide how you can get involved and how to go about doing so.

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A great place to start is the website for the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare: www.healthandwelfare.idaho.gov. Follow the links to find information about foster care, including answers about frequently asked questions, phone numbers and contact information in each region of Idaho, and links to other websites on foster care. There is no shortage of organizations who stand ready to help you get involved.

If you love children and want to make a positive difference in your community, please consider foster care. The experience can be very rewarding. The need is great, but the impact you make will be a lasting one. As a result of your caring involvement, those you take in will benefit for years to come, and your community will be a better place for it.